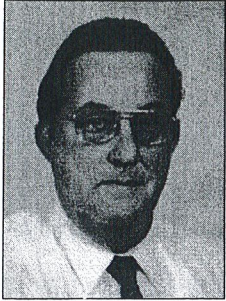


Fear, commerce and crime

Some thoughts on how crime and the physical environment affect your business



By Roland W. Peterson

Today we are told we can clone human beings. We are replacing human body parts with synthetic devices. The blind will be able

to see through video cameras that are attached to nerve-endings that will transmit images to the brain. There is DNA testing that will take us back to our ancestry thousands of years ago. We are advancing so rapidly in technology that mentioning people on the moon seems prehistoric. Man is so advanced today that he is light years ahead of every other living creature on earth.

There are very few things that man has not conquered—one of them is crime.

The challenge of crime to society changes with the advancement of civilization, particularly as technology continues to move forward. Greater opportunities and the desire for human comfort offer temptations for human greed. Not only do the good make use of these opportunities, the bad do not go into hibernation either.

Crime makes us feel insecure, anxious and fearful. When we look back in time, we see that in medieval times towns were built with thick, high walls around them and entrance gates that were closed at night. Precautions were taken to strengthen the feeling of security because people feared something or somebody. Never before in history however has the word fear been used with such anxiety as in the last and current decades. Security is not just a personal concern anymore; it has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Graphic images of hijackings, armed bank robberies, bombings, murders, snipers and the blowing up of buildings are burned into our memories through the ever-present media. Daily we are confronted with live images on television, whereas a few decades ago we would only have heard about these events on the radio or read about them in newspaper several days later.

Today, crime has become so common to human exis-

tence that people accept it as an unwelcome part of their life and (un)consciously adjust their behavior accordingly. Everyone acknowledges its presence, but very few people have a clear idea about the true nature and scope of crime and criminal behavior.

Criminologists have attempted for years to develop explanations of crime and delinquency. Theories have been created to explain the origins of criminal behavior and other theories have been developed to identify approaches to treatment or rehabilitation. None has proven successful in providing a comprehensive understanding of crime and delinquency. Accordingly, public policy has been guided by a succession of philosophies about the causes of crime.

The majority of philosophies about crime may be organized and summarized around five categories: legal, social, psychological, biological, and political. This article is not intended to be an academic study of the above-mentioned five philosophies. It is impossible for this commentary to enter into detail on all of the fields and disciplines that this topic covers. I will limit myself to making a few observations about the relationship between physical environment and its effect on human behavior and business endeavors.

It is safe to say that the location of buildings and their surroundings have an effect on human behavior. The placement of a bus stop, for example, can help make or break the businesses nearby, thus contributing to the perception that an area is unstable or unsafe. Everyone knows that zoning and business regulations contribute to a more controlled and safe community. But do they know that the size, shape, landscaping, and interior plan of local buildings also have an impact? The design and management of parking lots, storefronts, parks, schools, and just about everything in our community have important links to the problems of crime and the fear of crime.

For example: A mother with a toddler is driving through the main-street with the intention of getting a

few items at the drugstore. It is late in the afternoon and it is starting to get dark. As she approaches the drug-store, she sees five loud-mouthed men with beer bottles in their hands standing next door in the entrance of a grocery store. The entrance of the drugstore itself is badly lit and two chollers are arguing offensively with a lady selling lottery tickets. Immediately a feeling of fear dawns upon her. She looks down the street and sees a well-lit and appealing drugstore with no one outside. There is no doubt in my mind where she prefers to shop.

This example shows how the environment can effect the way people feel about your place of business. Its physical surroundings affect people's behavior and perceptions, which impact not only on attitudes but also on productivity, profit, and loss prevention. Once we are aware of this relationship, what is next?

Let's take the geographical area of San Nicolas where the physical environment certainly affects people's behavior and perception. In this area a certain amount of nuisance crime is committed on a daily basis. (Nuisance crimes are misdemeanor types of incidents, such as petty theft, harassment, begging, breaking and entering, etc). Both the police and the public tend to relate these incidents to the so-called choller problematic. There are essentially two areas of concern.

- There is an overwhelming agreement that the presence of chollers increases the fear of crime among citizens.
- A majority of residents believe that the conditions in which chollers live pose a public health hazard.

The question is if the public's fear of chollers as a contributing factor to crime is based predominantly on the mere presence and appearance of these 'street-people' or if there is a quantifiable link between chollers and crime? Is the magnitude of the problem on a national level as big as is being suggested by the media?

These are questions that we ask ourselves, but have no answers for. Was there ever a survey or study done on this topic? If so, what was ever done with it? If not, what are the competent authorities waiting for? For years, residents and especially the merchants have been complaining about this problem. All we notice is a large degree of tolerance and indecisiveness. How long do we have to wait? The longer it takes, the more difficult it will be to make changes.

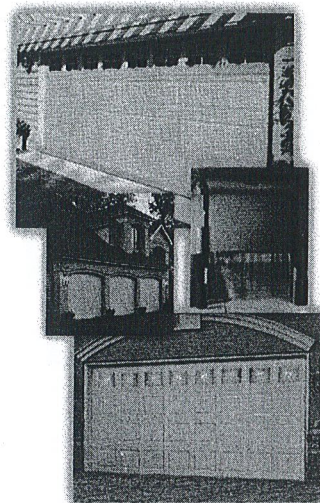
I believe the following recommendations would

contribute to alleviate the choller problem:

- Conduct a census, where police, government agencies, and social agencies contribute to assess the nature and impact of the choller problem.
- Conduct a strategic analysis of actual needs.
- Work with the shelters to create formalized policies and procedures. Police transportation of chollers would have to be included in this structure.
- Increase communication and coordination between various agencies and shelters.

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- Where appropriate, seek input and support from religious organizations.
- Instruct, recruit, and train 'in-service' personnel (police and other government agencies) on issues, problems, and resources for chollers.
- Assign a special police unit to deal with the choller problem.
- Study and monitor chollers to find out how and where they spend their day, where they eat, sleep, and buy drugs.

Understanding the complex issues involved and developing policies to deal with chollers would enable law enforcement agencies to make real contributions to the quality of life in our community. A well-planned response to the choller problem would allow departments to manage significant social problems while making efficient use of police resources.

The choller problem is furthermore intensified by an increasing pauperization. Buildings are allowed to deteriorate and fall into a state of decadence, thus creating niches for chollers.

Let's look at two examples chosen from among many: On one of the main roads leading into San Nicolas, there is a business place where the (front) facade is covered with barbed wire, making it look like a prison. What kind of an



impression does this give to the residents? What do tourists think, when they pass through this neighborhood? How long will a potential investor stand still in this area? The situation gets even worse a little distance away, where an old, abandoned house is rotting and falling apart. This house of broken and barricaded windows and doors serves as a dwelling for chollers and all kinds of rodents. Then there are the broken sidewalks. Trenches are often dug right in front of the entrance of your business, where they remain unattended for weeks or sometimes even months.

The aforementioned examples are not only a nuisance, but also present potential safety and health hazards. When you have these kinds of situations next to your business or property, you can only expect negative results. These are situations that create fear and will negatively influence your business. When the competent authorities do nothing about these situations, they are contributing to the decadence of your neighborhood.

Special attention should also be given to government housing projects, the so-called 'cas di pueblo'. These houses are generally built too small and too close to each other. There are no garages and no washing rooms, almost no gardens, no community houses, no recreation facilities, and no public street lighting. There is no privacy, neighbors interfere with each other, and there is little integration with the rest of the island community. Once built and occupied, the inhabitants are left there with no further guidance.

Without stereotyping too much, we can say that these housing projects are prone to become problem areas and may even lead to ghetto forming. High police assistance to these areas is not uncommon. When these housing projects are built in your area, business people tend to fear vandalism and nuisance. Homeowners fear devaluation of their property. Not in a broad radius is there ever an ATM machine to be found. The reason for this is obvious: Uncontrolled criminal activity in public areas, especially housing, affects the quality of life in the project. It affects the perception and subsequent development of attitudes and behavior of children who grow up in these places. It affects the neighborhood. A healthy neighborhood absorbs a public housing project and makes it part of its social fabric. This is what we should strive for.

We have been reading, hearing, and discussing many concepts of crime prevention, community policing, community-oriented policing, environmental designs for crime

prevention, etc. These are just new names for good-old-fashioned policing. There is no panacea for stopping crime and social ills. Many of our efforts do not yield results because we have not properly understood the concept nor the problem we are trying to address. Today there are more broken families and homelessness, a growing anger on the part of the disadvantaged and a rise in violent crimes.

How do we stop doing things the way we have always done them and start doing them in a way that would best meet the new demands placed upon us? It is enormously difficult to break old patterns of thinking and acting, and the changes needed seem too difficult to achieve, so we often end up making only token gestures to our good intentions.

We cannot expect to solve social unrest solely by the crime fighting approach to policing. Building architects will have to consult with the police on planning and design. Police officers will also have to spend more time on social problems if they are to minimize the cost and pain of social unrest. They should work cooperatively with building contractors, architects, engineers, public works, and planners to design and construct building projects that can reduce both fear and crime.

Infrastructure development has often followed, rather than preceded, growth. Early involvement of a knowledgeable law enforcement agency in the conceptualization and planning of community projects, can lead to improvement in the quality of life and reduction in the fear and incidence of crime.

This early involvement is one of the most cost-effective methods of crime prevention. The police are not in the business of telling other professionals how to do their jobs. The role of law-enforcement is to ask questions, share ideas, and provide information that would otherwise be unavailable to builders, designers, and planners.

Commercial and retail establishments have always used the physical environment to affect customers' perceptions and behavior. Crime has unfortunately become a fact of life. Most times, we have focused on intervention instead of prevention—leading to arrest and punitive measures. The time has come for the community to examine ways to eliminate or reduce crime to create a safer environment.

Our biggest challenge is to discover methods to combine environmental design with cooperation between citizens and authorities to curb crime, reduce fear, and thus improve the quality of life for all. ■

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